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**Names Shredded Apart: Banksy, Pseudonymity, and Fame**

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**Author bio**

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Pseudonyms have always been a common practice in graffiti and street art, going hand in hand with the pursuit of fame. One of the first celebrities of the North American graffiti movement, for example, was only known as ‘Taki 183’, a prolific writer whose notoriety became unprecedented after he was mentioned in a 1971 *New York Times* article. Today, well-known names include VHILS, Kobra, Os Gémeos, and Banksy, among others. Except for Banksy, the aforementioned examples are all artists known by their professional name but whose identity is transparent behind the pseudonym. The use of a pseudonym, then, does not always have to guarantee anonymity: the artist’s identity can be suspected or even be deliberately revealed.

In contrast, Banksy is known exclusively by his pseudonym: in spite of all ongoing speculation, the person behind it remains anonymous. In other words, while we know that the name *Banksy* refers to a famous street artist, we may have met Banksy in person without knowing it (cf. Paterson 2019). This is because *Banksy*, as a pseudonym, ‘facilitates identification within a constrained setting while simultaneously presenting a block to identification otherwise’ (Paterson 2019, p. 171). Adopting a pen-name in order to block identification has clear advantages, especially in the context of street art: concealing one’s identity in practices that often take place outside of the legal framework is an effective way to protect one’s privacy, to enable activities deemed incompatible with one’s ‘good name’ as a citizen, to avoid retaliation by authorities (cf. Barendt 2016), and to promote freedom of speech, expression, and creativity.

In terms of artistic production, however, pseudonyms can also be understood as a branding strategy (cf. Barendt 2016). By appearing as the name of the author, the *Banksy* pseudonym ‘becomes a kind of brand name, a recognizable sign that the cultural commodity will be of a certain kind of quality’ (Rose 1993, p. 1). In this case, the value and commodification even increase precisely because of the mystery surrounding the artist. This has been both praised and viewed with suspicion. For example, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012, p. 113) argues that Banksy ‘is a brand that trades on a recognizable unrecognizability, profiting from (even while admonishing) the

codes of celebrity visibility'. From her perspective, Banksy's critique of advanced capitalism feeds the system rather than challenging it.

To be sure, Banksy subverts the logic of celebrity and its hyper-visibility by choosing to dilute identity in obscurity, thus fuelling interest in the artist and the artworks. The latter are all we know for sure about Banksy. Indeed, as the bearer of the pseudonym, Banksy is only circumstantially identifiable, which means that all and only the 'actions performed in particular ways (i.e., those marked by the pseudonym) can be associated together' (Paterson 2019, p. 171). Thus, Banksy's artworks and public interventions are the only tangible relations we have to the artist. Below, I examine a few examples of Banksy's work that illuminate the way in which the artist constantly plays with pseudonymity to expose a system that is nonetheless quick to absorb this criticism.

Banksy's identity may be unknown, but his artworks are definitively far-famed. For one, *Girl With Balloon* was voted the most popular British artwork of 2017 (cf. Indrisek 2019). The stencil series, begun in London in 2002, has since been reused by Banksy for activist causes such as in Palestine and the Syrian conflict. The iconic work depicts a little girl either releasing or trying to reach a heart-shaped balloon despite the wind, as a symbolic representation of innocence and hope. The work is a typical Banksy: simple but effective images that quickly convey a strong message, even if *Girl With Balloon* lacks the wit that characterizes most *Banksys*. In fact, Banksy has cultivated a 'recognizable signature look' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p. 104) that impregnates the works and defines them as *Banksys*, in spite of the fact that they lack the artist's signature. A *Banksy* is usually biting, markedly political, and addresses issues such as consumerism, war, repression and capitalism. An example of this is Banksy's stencil series of rats, which function as a signature, and portray the artist as vermin, an outlaw or an outcast.

After the artist's intervention on the western border between Palestine and Israel in 2005 – where the *Girl* was depicted floating upwards with balloons – Banksy became a celebrity in street art. This fame feeds not only from the artist's anonymity, but also from the high risks associated with Banksy's interventions, which continue to challenge the art world, such as the illegal placement of paintings in high-profile museums. The value of Banksy's artworks grew hand-in-hand with notoriety: a *Girl With Balloon* stencil mural was removed, restored, and sold by Sincura Group in 2014 for about half a million pounds. The sale of an unsanctioned mural in public space

raised ethical questions about who owned the artwork (cf. Bengtson 2016): the artist, the owner of the wall, the general public, or the first person to take it? At the same time, the incident revealed something deeply ironic: apparently, even a work intended to critique the established art world cannot escape the normative value cycle of the art world.

Banksy's other *Girl With Balloon* works demonstrate how, indeed, the pseudonym can remain tied up in the conventions of the art world with its emphasis on the author's name and signature. In 2004-05, Banksy released a limited edition of *Girl With Balloon* prints, 600 unsigned and 150 signed copies, the latter selling for £150 and the former for half that price. Since then, and as the Banksy cult has grown, the sale price for these prints has risen to digits of thousands. The discrepancy between the value of the signed and unsigned prints shows the continuing importance of the artist's signature. The signature has the social function of attribution, authentication and identification: it binds the artwork to the artist, even if it is an anonymous person. With the true identity of Banksy unknown, the *Banksy* name still acts as the holder of authorship: it is the pseudonym and not the 'real' artist that functions as the author of the artworks. As Michel Foucault argues, regardless of anonymity, an author's proper name does not simply designate a person, but rather has the function of binding the oeuvre. This aggregation of different artworks as an oeuvre is important for reception, authentication, and valuation because 'the author-function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses' (Foucault 1998, p. 216). This shows how deeply-ingrained the logic of the author-function is: even if the artist's proper name is nothing more than a pseudonym, it still points to an entity that can reify the author.

Banksy, however, continues to challenge the values of the artist's identity and signature. In this spirit, the artist set up a stall of unsigned original prints in Central Park in 2013 – this time completely anonymous, even without a mention of his pseudonym. Sales were low: at \$60 apiece, the artist made \$420. When Banksy exposed the hoax on social media, the price of the prints the artist sold skyrocketed. The Central Park incident demonstrates once again the extent to which artworks are judged and valued by the name of the artist: it is the signature of the artist that gives value to the artwork. Yet the intervention also illustrates how Banksy, who created a 'name' for himself through elaborate, outrageous, and risky stunts and by shrouding

his identity in mystery and anonymity, has construed a unique brand with the secrecy about, and quasi-revelation of, his authorship as his greatest currency (copyright) (cf. São Simão 2020). Fittingly, the artist himself has once declared, paradoxically, that ‘nobody ever listened to me until they didn’t know who I was’ (Banksy 2005, p. 13). As a result, the process of authentication of his artwork escapes the traditional art world conventions. In this case, as with most *Banksys*, the identification process took place through social media, which, together with the Pest Control platform that exclusively issues certificates of authenticity for Banksy’s works, is a way to ‘sign’ the work while maintaining anonymity *and* keeping control of the ‘Banksy’ brand (cf. Bengsten 2016).

Banksy’s name and work, then, remain elusive – but the capitalist system and the art world are quick to adapt. In 2018, a print of *Girl With Balloon* was given a new identity when it was shredded at a live auction: on that instance, it was retitled *Love is in the Bin*. The shredding occurred at the symbolic moment the artwork sold for about £1,000,000. It was a spectacular act of self-sabotage that sparked controversy. However, it is expected that the half-cut work is now worth at least half more. Even other brands, outside of the domain of art, capitalized from the high-profile event (cf. Indrisek, 2019): shortly thereafter, the fast-food chain McDonald’s was inspired by the prank to advertise its French fries as the result of a similar act of artistic ‘shredding’. Thus, Banksy constantly challenges the system and the established art world, while the latter still manages to reassimilate dissenters into its ranks. In this game of hide-and-seek, Banksy keeps pushing the boundaries of celebrity, the capitalist system, the art market and artistic resistance. And we all play along.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes on contributor**

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